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Iraq makes Christmas Day an official nationwide holiday



Iraq has made Christmas Day a national holiday, its government confirmed yesterday. The Iraqi Cabinet approved an amendment to its national holidays law which creates a new official one 'on the occasion of the birth of Jesus Christ'.

Previously, Christmas Day had been designated as a religious break only for the Iraqi Christian community, but the amendment extends the holiday to everyone.

'Happy Christmas to our Christian citizens, all Iraqis and to all who are celebrating around the world,' the Iraqi government wrote on Twitter.

'We extend our warmest wishes to Christians in Iraq and around the world for a very happy and peaceful Christmas,' it added.

Iraq is a 95 per cent Muslim country – 66 per cent are Shia and 29 per cent Sunni.

There are thought to be only around 300,000 Christians remaining in the country, the vast majority of whom are Aramaic-speaking ethnic Assyrians.

There are also a smaller communities of Armenians, Kurds, Arabs and Iraqi Turkmen.

Before western countries' invasion of the country in 2003, Iraqi Christians numbered around 1.4 million, but the onslaught of violence forced hundreds of thousands to flee, either to Iraqi Kurdistan or further abroad. They have also found themselves persecuted on religious grounds by so-called Islamic State in recent years.

Christians living areas under ISIS control were ordered to pay a large tax, convert to Islam, or be killed. Hundreds of Iraqi Christians held their prayers across the country under tight security this Christmas. Catholics joined together to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ at St George Chaldean Church in Baghdad.

Mass celebrations also took place at the al-Tahira al-Kubra church and the Mar Addai Chaldean Church, both in the Assyrian town of Qaraqosh, some 13 km east of Mosul.

Source: Daily Mail